MUTATION PLANET

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The vast and brooding landscape, filled with ominous mutterings, ground-trembling rumblings, stretched all around in an infinity of gloom. The mountainous form of *Dominus* moved across this landscape at speed, like a massy shadow, heavy with power and sullenly majestic. Above him the opaque sky, lurid and oppressively close, flared intermittently and discharged sheets of lightning that were engulfed in the distant hills. In the instant before some creature fed on the electric glare, the dimness would be relieved, outlining endless, uneven expanses of near-barren soil. *Dominus,* however, took no sensory advantage of these flashes; his inputs covered a wider, more reliable range of impressions.

As he sped through his domain he scattered genetic materials to either side of him. These would dampen down evolutionary activity for miles around and ensure that no lifeform would arise that could inconvenience him or interfere with the roadway over which he moved. Built by himself as one of the main instruments of his control over his environment, this roadway spanned the whole eight thousand miles of the planet's single continent, and was a uniform quarter of a mile wide; side roads diverged, at irregular intervals, into the larger peninsulas. Since the substance of the roadbed was quasi-organic, having been extruded by organs he possessed for that purpose, *Dominus* could, moreover, sense instantly any attack, damage, or unacceptable occurrence taking place on any part of it.

After leaving the interminable plain the road undulated over a series of hills, clinging always to the profile of the land, and swept down into a gigantic bowl-like valley. Here the gloom took on the darkness of a pit, but lifeforms were more copious. By the light of the flickering lightning flashes, or by that of the more diffuse radiations employed by *Dominus,* they could be seen skulking out there in the valley, a scattering of unique shapes. They were absolutely motionless, since none dared to move while *Dominus* passed by. Leagues further afield lights winked and radio pulses beamed out as the more powerful entities living up the slopes of the valley signalled their submission.

Dominus dosed the valley heavily with genetic mist, then surged up the opposite wall. As he swept over onto a table-land a highly-charged lightning bolt came sizzling down, very close; he caught it in one of his conductors and stored the charge in his accumulators. It was then, while he raced away from the valley, that his radar sense spotted the unidentifiable object descending through the cloud blanket. Puzzled, *Dominus* slowed down to scarcely a hundred miles per hour. This was the first unusual event for several millennia. He could not, at first, account for it.

The strangeness lay in the fact that the object was so large: not very much smaller than *Dominus* himself. (Its shape, though new to him, was of no account—even at the low, controlled level of mutation thousands of different lifeforms continued to evolve.) Also, it was moving through the air without the visible benefit of wings of any kind. Come to that, a creature of such bulk could not be lifted by wings at all.

Where had it evolved? In the sky? Most unlikely. The plethora of flying forms that had once spent their lives winging through the black, static-drenched cloud layer had almost—thanks to *Dominus*—died out. Over the ages his mutation-damping mist, rising on the winds, had accumulated there, and without a steady mutation rate the flying forms had been unable to survive the ravages of their environment and each other.

Then from where? Some part of the continent receiving only scant surveillance from *Dominus?* He was inclined to doubt this also. The entity he observed could not have developed without many generations of mutation, which would have come to his notice before now.

Neither was the ocean any more likely a source. True, *Dominus* carried out no surveillance there. But a great deal of genetic experience was required to survive on the land surface. Emergent amphibia lacked that experience and were unable to gain a foothold. For that reason oceanic evolution seemed to have resigned itself to a purely submarine, existence.

One other possibility remained: the emptiness beyond the atmospheric covering. For *Dominus* this possibility was theoretical only, carrying no emotional ambience. Up to now *this* world had absorbed his psychic energies: *this* was life and existence.

Due to this ambiguity *Dominus* did not act immediately but kept in check the strong instinctive urges that were triggered off. Interrupting his pan-continental patrol for the first time in millennia, he followed the object to its landing place. Then he settled down patiently to await developments.

Eliot Harst knew exactly where to find Balbain. He climbed the curving ramp to the upper part of the dome-shaped spaceship and opened a door. The alien was standing at the big observation window, looking out on to Five's (whatever system they were in, they always named the planets in order from their primary) blustering semi-night.

The clouds glowed patchily as though bombs were being let off among them; the lightning boomed and crashed. The tall, thin alien ignored all this, however. His attention was fixed on the gigantic organism they had already named *Dominus*, which was slumped scarcely more than a mile away. Eliot had known him to gaze at it, unmoving, for hours.

"The experiment has worked out after all," he said. "Do you want to take a look?"

Balbain tore his gaze from the window and looked at Eliot. He came from a star which, to Eliot, was only a number in Solsystem's catalogs. His face was partly obscured by the light breathing mask he wore to supplement ship atmosphere. (The aliens all seemed to think that human beings were more sensitive to discomfort than themselves: everything on the ship was biased towards the convenience of Eliot and his assistant Alanie.) But over the mask Balbain's bright bird-like eyes were visible, darting from his bony, fragile and quite unhuman skull.

"The result is positive?" he intoned in an oddly hollow, resonant voice.

"It would seem so."

"It is as we already knew. I do not wish to see the offspring at present, but thank you for informing me."

With that he returned to the window and seemed to become abruptly unaware of Eliot's presence.

Sighing, the Earthman left the chamber. A few yards further along the gallery he stopped at a second door. Jingling a bell to announce his presence, he entered a small bare cell and gave the same message as before to its occupant.

Abrak came from a star as far from Balbain's as the latter was from Solsystem. When fully erect he stood less than five feet in height and had a skin like corded cloth: full of neat folds and wavy grains. At the moment he squatted on the naked floor, his skeletal legs folded under him in an extraordinary double-jointed way that Eliot found quite grotesque.

Abrak's voice was crooning and smooth, and contained unnerving infra-sound beats that made a human listener feel uneasy and slightly dizzy—Eliot already knew, in fact, that Abrak could, if he wished, kill him merely by speaking: by voicing quiet vibrations of just the right frequency to cripple his internal organs.

"So the picture we have built is vindicated?" he replied to Eliot's announcement, pointing a masked, dog-like face towards the Earthman.

"There can be little doubt of it."

"I will view the offspring." The alien rose in one swift motion.

Eliot had already decided that there was no point in reporting to the fifth member of the team: Zeed, the third of the non-humans. He appeared to take no more interest in their researches.

He led the way back down the connecting ramps, through the interior of the spaceship which he had been finding increasingly depressing of late. More and more it reminded him of a hurriedly-built air-raid shelter, devoid of decoration, rough-hewn, dreary and echoing.

Balbain's people had built the ship. Eliot could recall his excitement on learning of its purpose, an excitement that doubled when it transpired he had a chance of joining it. For the ship was travelling from star to star on a quest for knowledge. And as it journeyed it occasionally recruited another scientist from a civilization sufficiently advanced, if he would make a useful member of the team. So far, in addition to the original Balbain, there had been Zeed, Abrak (none of these being their real, unpronounceable names, but convenience names for human benefit: transliterations or syllabic equivalents), and, of course, Elliot and Alanie.

Alanie had been, for Eliot, one of the fringe benefits—another being that when they returned to Solsystem they would take back with them a prodigious mass of data, a countless number of discoveries, and would become immortally famous. The aliens, recognizing that human sexuality is more than usually needful, had offered to allow a male-female pair as Solsystem's contribution. Eliot had discovered that his prospect of a noble ordeal was considerably mitigated by the thought of spending that time alone with his selected team-mate: Alanie Leitner, vivacious, companionable, with an I.Q. of 190 (slightly better than Eliot's own, in fact) and an experienced all-round researcher. The perfect assistant for him, the selection board had assured him, and he had found little in their verdict to disagree with, then or since.

But the real thrill had been in the thing itself: in being part of a voyage of discovery that transcended racial barriers, in the uplifting demonstration that wherever intelligence arose it formed the same aspiration: to know, to examine, to reveal the universe.

Mind was mind: a universal constant.

Unfortunately he and Alanie seemed to be drifting apart from their alien travelling companions, to understand them less and less. The truth was that he and Alanie were doing all the work. They would arrive at a system and begin a survey; yet very quickly the interest of the others would die off and the humans would be left to carry out all the real research, draw the conclusions and write up the reports completely unaided. As a matter of fact Zeed now took scarcely any interest at all and did not stir from his quarters for months on end.

Eliot found it quite inexplicable, especially since Balbain and Abrak, both of whom impressed one by the strength of their intellects, admitted that since leaving Solsystem much had been discovered that was novel.

At the bottom of the ramp he led Abrak into the laboratory section. And there to greet them was Alanie Leitner: a wide, slightly sulky mouth in a pale face; a strong nose, steady brown eyes and auburn, nearly reddish hair cut squarely on the nape of the neck. And even in her white laboratory smock the qualities of her figure were evident.

Though constructed of the same concrete-like stuff as the rest of the spaceship, the laboratory was made more cheerful by being a place of work. At the far end was the test chamber. Abrak made his way there and peered through the thick window. The parent specimen they had begun with lay up against the wall of the circular chamber, apparently dying after its birth-giving exertions. It was about the size of a dog, but spider-like, with the addition of a rearward clump of tissue that sprouted an untidy bunch of antenna-type sensors.

Its offspring, lying inert a few yards away, offered absolutely no resemblance to the spider-beast. A dense-looking, slipper-shaped object, somewhat smaller than the parent, it could have been no more than a lump of wood or metal.

"It's too soon yet to be able to say what it can do," Alanie said, joining them at the window.

Abrak was silent for a while. "Is it not possible that this is a larval, immature stage, thus accounting for the absence of likeness?" he suggested then.

"It's conceivable, certainly," Eliot answered. "But we think the possibility is remote. For one thing we are pretty certain that the offspring was already adult and fully grown, or practically so, when it was born. For another, the fact that the parent reproduced at all is pretty convincing confirmation of our theory. Added to everything else we know, I don't feel disposed towards accepting any other explanation."

"Agreed," Abrak replied. "Then we must finally accept that the Basic Polarity does not obtain here on Five."

"That's right."

Although he should have become accustomed to the idea by now, Eliot's brain still went spinning when he thought of it and all it entailed.

Scientifically speaking the notion of the Basic Polarity went back, as far as Solsystem was concerned, to the Central Dogma. In a negative sense, it also went back to the related Koestler's Question, posed late in the 20th Century.

The Central Dogma expressed the keystone of genetics: that the interaction between *gene* and *soma* was a one-way traffic. The genes formed the body. But nothing belonging to the body, or anything that it experienced, could modify the genes or have any effect on the next generation. Thus there was no inheritance of acquired characteristics; evolution was conducted over immensely long periods of time through random mutations resulting from cosmic radiation, or through chemical accidents in the gene substance itself.

Why, Koestler asked, should this be so? A creature that could refashion its genes, endowing its offspring with the means to cope with the hazards *it* had experienced, would have a great advantage in the struggle for survival. Going further, a creature that could lift itself by its bootstraps and produce a superior type in this way would have an even greater advantage. Furthermore, Koestler argued that direct reshaping of the genes should be perfectly within the capabilities of organic life, using chemical agents.

So the absence of such a policy in organic life was counter-survival, a curious, glaring neglect on the part of nature. The riddle was answered, by Koestler's own contemporaries, in the following manner: if the *soma*, on the basis of its experiences, was to modify the gene-carrying DNA, then the modification would have to be planned and executed by the instinctive functions of the nervous system, or by whatever corresponded to those functions in any conceivable creature. But neither the instinctive brains of the higher orders, nor the primitive ganglia of the lower orders, had the competence to carry out this work: acting purely by past-conditioned responses, they had no apprehension of the future and would not have been able to relate experience to genetic alteration. Hence life had been dependent on random influences: radiation and accident.

For direct gene alteration to be successful, Koestler's rebuttors maintained, some form of intellect would be needed. Primitive animals did not have this; if the gene-changing animal existed, then that animal was man, and man worked not through innate bodily powers but by artificial manipulation of the chromosomes. Even then, his efforts had been partial and inept: the eradication of defective genes to rectify the increasing incidence of deformity; the creation of a few new animals that had quickly sickened and died.

And with that the whole matter of Koestler's Question had been quietly forgotten. The Central Dogma was reinstated, not merely as an arbitrary fact but as a necessary principle. If Koestler's Question had any outcome, then it was in the recognition of the Basic Polarity: the polarity between individual and species. Because the species, not the individual, had to be the instrument of evolution. If the Central Dogma did not hold, then species would not need to exist at all (and neither, incidentally, would sex). The rate of change would be so swift that there would be nothing to hold them together—and any that did exist, because of some old-fashioned immutability of their genes, would rapidly be wiped out. And indeed the Basic Polarity seemed to be the fundamental form of life everywhere in the universe, as Balbain, Abrak and Zeed all confirmed.

Eliot was thinking of renaming Five "Koestlers Planet."

On a world where all traces of the past could be wiped out overnight, they would probably never know exactly what had happened early in Five's biological evolution to overthrow the Central Dogma. Presumably the instinctive functions had developed, not intelligence exactly, but a unique kind of telegraph between their experience of the external world and the microscopic coding of the germ plasm. It would, as Alanie pointed out, only have to happen once, and that once could even be at the bacterial level. The progeny of a single individual would rapidly supplant all other fauna. In the explosion of organic development that followed it would be but a short step before gene alteration became truly inventive; intellectual abilities would soon arise to serve this need.

It had been some time before the idea had dawned on them that Five might be a planet of single-instance species; in other words, of no species at all. There was one four-eyed stoat; one elephantine terror; one leaping prong; one blanket (their name for a creature of that description which spent most of its time merely lying on the ground). In fact there was a bewildering variety of forms of which only one example could be found. But there were one or two exceptions to the rule—or so they had thought. They had videotaped six specimens of a type of multi-legged snake. Only later had they discovered that the resemblance between them was a case of imitation, of convergent evolution among animals otherwise unrelated.

So they had been forced, reluctantly, to accept the evidence of their eyes, and later, of the electron microscope. But only now, in the last hour, was Eliot one hundred percent convinced of it.

Another thing that had made him cautious was the sheer degree of knowledge and intelligence consistent with this level of biological engineering. He would have expected every creature on the planet to display intelligence at least equivalent to the human. Instead the animals here were just that—animals. Clever, ferocious animals, but content to inhabit their ecological niches and evincing no intellectual temperament.

All, that is, except *Dominus*.

They called him *Dominus* because he had the aspect of being king of all he surveyed. He must have weighed a thousand tons at least. He was also owner of the road system, which at first they had taken to be evidence of a civilization, or at least the remains of one. It was now clear, however, that the road had been *Dominus'* own idea—or, more probably, his parent's idea.

The great beast had demonstrated his understanding when they had gone out and tried to trap specimens for laboratory study. The exercise had proved to be dangerous and nearly impossible. Five's fauna were the universe's greatest experts at not getting killed, caught or trapped, and had responded not merely with claw, fang and evasive speed, but with electricity, poison gas, infra-sound (Abrak's own speciality), corrosives of various types they had still not classified but which had scared them very much, thick strands of unknown substance spun swiftly out from spinnerets and carried on the wind, slugs of pure iron ejected from porcupine-like quills with the velocity of rifle bullets, and—believe it or not—organically generated laser beams.

Retreating after one of their sorties to the shelter of their spaceship's force shield, the hunters had been about to give up and go back inside.

Alanie had said: "Let's get off this planet before one of those things throws a fusion beam at us."

And then *Dominus* had acted. Rushing down, like a smaller hill himself, from the hill where he had parked himself, he had advanced driving several smaller animals before him. Finally they had delivered themselves almost at the scientists' feet and promptly fallen unconscious. *Dominus* had then returned to the hill-top, where he had squatted motionless ever since. And Eliot, blended with his amazement, had felt the same thrill and transcendence that had overwhelmed him at the first arrival of Balbain's starship.

Dominus understood their wants! He was helping them!

Conceivably he could be communicated with. But that problem had to wait. They got the creatures inside and put them under adequate restraint. Then Eliot and Alanie went immediately to work.

The creatures' genes followed the standard pattern produced by matter on planetary surfaces everywhere: coded helices forming a group of chromosomes. The code was doublet and not triplet, as it was on Earth, but that in itself was not unusual: Abrak's genes also were in doublet code. More significantly, the single gonad incorporated a molecular factory, vast by microscopic standards, able to dispatch a chemical operator to any specific gene in a selected germ cell. And, furthermore, a chain of command could be discerned passing into the spinal column (where there was a spinal column) and thence to the brain (where there was a brain).

Eliot had written in his journal:

> I get the impression that we are witness to a fairly late stage of Five's evolutionary development. For one thing, life here is relatively sparse, as though fierce competition has thinned down numbers rather than increased them, leading to a more subdued mode of existence. There are no predators; defensive mutations on the part of a potential prey would no doubt make it unprofitable to be a carnivore. The vegetation on Five conforms to the Basic Polarity and so presumably predates the

> overthrow of the Central Dogma, but it survives patchily in the form of scrub savannahs and a few small forests, and in many areas does not exist at all. The majority of animals own a patch of vegetation which they defend against all comers with an endless array of natural weapons, but they eat only in order to obtain bodybuilding materials—proteins and trace elements—and not to provide energy, which they obtain by soaking up the ubiquitous lightning discharges. Some animals have altogether abandoned any dependence of an external food chain: they carry out the whole of the anabolic process themselves, taking the requisite elements and minerals from soil and air and metabolizing all their requirements using the energy from this same lightning,
>
> It has occurred to us that all the animals here are potentially immortal. Ageing is a species-characteristic, the life-span being adjusted to the maximum benefit of the species, not of the individual. If all our conclusions are correct, an organism on Five would continue to live a self-contained life until meeting some pressing exigency it was not able to master; only then would it reproduce to create a more talented version of itself and afterwards, perhaps, permit itself to die. This notion suggests that a test may be possible.

The slipper organism was the outcome of that test. They had placed the spider-thing in a chamber and subjected it to stress. They had bombarded it with pressure, heat, missiles, and various other discomforts suggested by the details of its metabolism. And they had waited to see whether it would react by "conceiving" and ultimately giving birth to another creature better than itself.

Of course, the new organism would be designed to accomplish one thing above all: escape. Eliot was curious now to see how the slipper would attempt it.

"Might it not be dangerous?" Abrak questioned mildly.

Eliot flipped a switch. A thick slab of dull metal slid down to occlude the window. Instead, they could continue to watch through a vidcamera.

"I'd like to see it get through that," he boasted. "Carbon and titanium alloy a foot thick. It's surrounded by it."

"You are being unsubtle," said Abrak. "Perhaps the beast will rely on trickery."

Alanie gave a deep sigh that strained her full breasts voluptuously against the fabric of her smock. "Well, what now?" she asked. "We've been here six months. I think we've solved the basic mystery of the place. Isn't it time we were moving on?"

"I'd like to stay longer," Eliot said thoughtfully. "I want to see if we can get into communication with *Dominus.*"

"But how?" she asked, sitting down at a bench and waving her hand. "Communication is a species-characteristic. He probably would never understand what language is."

"And yet already he's given us help, so we *can* communicate after a fashion," Eliot argued.

A warning sound came from Abrak. Something was happening on the screen looking into the test chamber.

The slipper organism had decided to act. Gliding smoothly to the far side of the chamber, nearest the skin of the ship, it pressed its tapered end against the wall. Abruptly the toe of the slipper ignited into an intense glare too bright for the vidcamera to handle. An instant later fumes billowed up and filled the chamber, obscuring everything.

By the time they cleared sufficiently for the onlookers to see anything, the slipper had made its exit through the wall of the chamber, and thence through the ship's skin, by burning a channel whose edges were still white-hot.

"I think," said Eliot somberly, "it might just have been a fusion beam, or something just as good."

He paused uncertainly. Then he flung open a cupboard and began pulling out gear. "Come on," he said, "We're going after our specimen."

"But it will kill us," Alanie protested.

"Not if *Dominus* helps us again. And somehow I think he will."

Dominus is an intelligent being, he told himself. Intelligent beings are motivated by curiosity and a sense of co-operation with other intelligent beings. His hunt for the slipper was, in fact, impelled more by the desire to prompt *Dominus* into co-operating with them again than by any interest in regaining the slipper itself, which could well be far away by now.

"But, once having recaptured the creature, how will you retain it?" inquired Abrak, looking meaningfully at the gaping hole in the chamber.

"We'll keep it under sedation," Eliot said, buckling on a protective suit.

Minutes later he stood at the foot of the spaceship. Besides the protective suit he was armed with a gun that fired recently prepared sleep darts (they had worked on the slipper's parent, following a biochemical analysis of that creature) and a cylinder that extruded a titanium mesh net.

Though evincing less enthusiasm, Alanie and Abrak had nevertheless followed him, despite his waiver to the girl. Abrak was unprotected,

carried no weapons, and relied on his flimsy ship mask to take care of Five's atmosphere.

The environment boomed, flickered and flashed all around them. To Eliot's surprise the slipper could be seen less than a hundred yards away, lying quietly in the beams of their torches.

He glanced up towards the bulk of *Dominus*, then stepped resolutely forward, aware of the footsteps of the others behind him.

Up on the hill, *Dominus* began to move. Eliot stopped and stared up at him exultantly.

"Eliot," Abrak crooned at his elbow, "I strongly recommend caution. Specifically, I recommend a return to the ship."

Eliot made no answer. His mind was racing, wondering what gesture he could make to *Dominus* when the vast beast recaptured the slipper and returned it to them.

He was quite, quite wrong.

Dominus halted some distance away, and extruded a tongue, or tentacle, travelling at ground level almost too fast for the eye to follow. In little more than a second or two it had flashed across the sandy soil and scrubby grass, seized on Alanie, lifted her bodily from the ground and whisked her away before a scream could form in her throat. Eliot noticed, blurrily, that the entire length of the tentacle was covered with wriggling wormy protuberances.

Even as Alanie was withdrawn into the body of *Dominus* Eliot was running forward, howling wildly and firing his dart gun. Light footsteps pattered to his rear; surprisingly strong, bony arms restrained his. "It is no use, Eliot. *Dominus* has taken her. He is not what you thought."

Early on *Dominus* had perceived that the massy object, which he now accepted came from beyond the atmosphere, was not itself a lifeform but a lifeform's construct. The idea was already a familiar one: artifacts were rare on his planet—biological evolution was simpler—but there had been a brief period when they had proliferated, attaining increasing orders of sophistication until they had nearly devastated the continent. Stored in his redundant genes *Dominus* still retained all the knowledge of his ancestors on that score.

From the construct emerged undoubtedly organic entities, and it was in this that the mystery lay: there were several of them. *Dominus* spent some time mulling over this inexplicable fact. Who, then, was owner of the construct? He noted that, within limits, all the foreign lifeforms bore a resemblance to one another, and reminded himself that ecological convergence was an occasional phenomenon within his own domain. Could this convergence have been carried further and some kind of *ecological common action* (he formed the concept with difficulty) have arisen among entities occupying the same ecological niche? He reasoned that he should entertain no preconceptions as to the courses evolution might take under unimaginably alien conditions. Some relationship even more incomprehensible to him might be the case.

So he had been patient, watching jealously as the life-forms surveyed part of his domain in a flying artifact, but doing nothing. Then they had attempted, but failed, to capture some native organisms. Wanting to see what would take place, *Dominus* had delivered a few to them.

When he saw the mutated lifeform emerge from the construct on its escape bid, he knew it was as he had anticipated. The aliens must have made a genetic analysis of all their specimens. The massy construct was sealed against *Dominus*' mutation-damping genes, and within that isolation they had carried out an experiment, subjecting one of the specimens to a challenge situation and prompting it to reproduce.

Dominus could forbear no longer. He issued the slipper with a stern command to stay fast. It was sufficiently its father's son to know what the consequences of disobeying him would be. Three alien lifeforms emerged in pursuit. To begin with, *Dominus* took one of the pair that were so nearly identical.

Alanie Leitner floated, deep within *Dominus* body, in a sort of protein jelly. Mercifully, she was quite dead. Thousands of nerve-thin tendrils entered her body to carry out a brief but adequate somatic exploration. At the same time billions upon billions of RNA operators migrated to her gonads (there were two of them) and sifted down to the genetic level where they analyzed her chromosomes with perfect completeness.

"It killed her," Eliot was repeating in a stunned, muttering voice. "It killed her."

Abrak had persuaded him to return to the ship. They found that Balbain had abandoned his vigil and was pacing the central chamber situated over the laboratory. His bird-eyes glittered at them with unusual fervor.

"We can delay no further," he boomed. "*Dominus*' qualities cannot be gainsaid. The sense of him is overpowering. Therefore my quest is at an end. I shall return home."

"No!" crooned Abrak suddenly, in a hard tone Eliot had not heard him use before. "This planet also holds the promise of answering *our* requirements."

"You take second place. *I* originated this expedition, and therefore you are pre-empted."

"We shall see who will pre-empt whom," Abrak barked.

While the import of the exchange was lost on Eliot, he was bewildered at seeing these two, whom he had thought of as dispassionate men (beings, anyway) of science, quarreling and snarling like wild dogs. So palpable

was the ferocity that he was startled out of his numbness and waved his arms placatingly as though to separate them.

"Gentlemen! Is this any way for a scientific expedition to conduct itself?"

The aliens glanced at him. Balbain's mask had become wet—perhaps with the exudations of some emotion—and partly transparent. Through it Eliot saw the gaping, square mouth that never closed.

"Let us laugh," Balbain said, addressing Abrak.

They both gave vent to regular chugging expulsions of air; it was a creaking monotone, devoid of mirth but a weird simulation of human laughter. Neither species, to Eliot's knowledge, were endowed with a sense of humor at all; once or twice before he had heard them use this travesty to indicate, in human speech, where they believed laughter would be appropriate.

He felt chilled. A feeling of *alienness* wafted towards him from the two beings, whom previously he had regarded as companions.

Balbain made a vague gesture. "We know that you judge us by your own standards," he said, "but it is not so. Like you, we each came on this expedition to satisfy cravings inherent in our species. But those cravings are different from yours and from each other..."

His voice softened and became almost caressing. Bending his head slightly, he indicated the wall of the ship, as though to direct Eliot's attention outside.

"Try to imagine what evolution means here on Five. It takes not eons or millions of years to produce a biological invention, but only a few months. The Basic Polarity is not here to soften life's blows; competition is so intense that Five is the toughest testing ground in the universe. The result of all this should be obvious. What we have here is the most capable, potentially the most powerful source of life that could possibly exist. And *Dominus* is the fulfilment of that process. The most intolerant, the most *domineering*—" he put special emphasis on the word—"entity that the universe can produce!"

"Domineering?" echoed Eliot, frowning.

"But of course! Think for a moment: what special quality must a creature develop on Five in order to make itself safe? The ability to dominate everything around it! *Dominus* has that quality to the ultimate degree. He is the Lord, in submission to whom my species can at last find peace of mind."

Balbain spoke with such passion and in such a strange manner that Eliot could only stand and stare. Abrak spoke softly, turning his fox's snout towards him.

"It is hard for Balbain to convey what he is feeling," he crooned. "Perhaps I can explain it to your intellect, at least. First, the romantic picture you harbor concerning the fellowship of sentient minds is, I am afraid, quite incorrect. Mentalities are even more diverse in character than are physical forms. What goads us into action is not what goads you."

"Then we cannot understand one another?" Eliot said.

"Only indirectly. In almost every advanced species there is a central drive that comes from its evolutionary history and overrides all other emotions—in its best specimens. This overriding urge gives the race as a whole its existential meaning. To other races it might look futile or even ridiculous—as, indeed, yours does to us—but to the species concerned it is a universal imperative, self-evident and inescapable."

He paused to allow Eliot to absorb what he was saying. While Balbain looked on, seeming scarcely any less agitated, he continued calmly: "For reasons too complex to describe, life on Balbain's world developed a submission-orientation. The physical conditions there, much harsher than what you are accustomed to, caused living beings to enter into an elaborate network of relationships in which each sought, not to dominate, but to *be* dominated by some other power, the stronger the better. This craving is thus the compass needle that guides Balbain's species. To them it is self-fulfilment, the inner meaning of the universe itself."

Eliot glanced at Balbain. The revelation made him feel uncomfortable.

"But how *can* it be?"

"Every species sees its own fixation as expressing the hidden nature of the universe. Do not you?"

Eliot brushed aside the question, which he did not understand. "But what's all this about *Dominus?*"

"Why, he represents the other half of this craving. His is a mentality of compulsive domination. He rules this planet, and would rule any planet with which he came in contact. Balbain knows this. With *Dominus* to command them, his people will feel something of completeness."

A small flash of insight came to Eliot. "That is *his* reason for this expedition?"

"Correct. On his own world Balbain is a sort of knight, or saint, who has set out in search of this... Holy Grail."

"We shall offer ourselves as *Dominus*' slaves," Balbain boomed hollowly. "It is his nature to assume the position of master."

Eliot tried to fight off his feeling of revulsion, but failed. "You're... insane..." he whispered.

Once again Abrak's fake laughter chugged out. "But Balbain's assessment of *Dominus* is perfectly correct. Five *is* the source of potentially the greatest, and in many ways the strangest, power that existence is capable of producing, and *Dominus*, at this moment in time, is the highest

expression of that power. There can be others—and that is why it is of interest to my people! We also have an existential craving!"

His snout turned menacingly towards Balbain. Eliot thought suddenly of his frightening ability to generate infra-sound.

"You will have no opportunity to satisfy it. Nothing will prevent us from becoming the property of *Dominus*." Balbain's words throbbed with passion. He was like an animal in heat.

The two began to circle one another warily. Eliot backed towards the door, afraid of infra-sound. He saw Abrak's snout open behind his mask.

Shuddering waves of vibration passed through his body.

But, incredibly, in the same second Abrak died. His body was converting, from the head down, into sand-colored dust which streamed across the chamber in a rustling spray.

Balbain's claw-like hand held the presumed source of this phenomenon: a device consisting of a cluster of tubes. When nothing remained of Abrak he put it away in a fold of his garment.

"Fear not," he said to Eliot in a conciliatory tone. "You have no reason to obstruct me. After I take home the glad tidings, you can return to Solsystem."

Eliot did not answer, but merely stood as if paralyzed. Balbain gave a brief, apologetic burst of hollow, fake laughter, seeming to guess what was on Eliot's mind.

"As for Abrak, reserve your judgment on my action. I have given him what he desired—though to tell the truth he would have preferred the fate of your female, Alanie."

"Alanie," Eliot repeated. "How can we be sure she's dead? It may be keeping her alive. I don't know why you murdered Abrak, Balbain, but if you want me to help you, then help me to get Alanie back. Then I'll do anything you ask of me."

"Defy *Dominus?*" Balbain looked at him pityingly. "Pointless, hopeless, perverted dreams..."

Suddenly he rushed past Eliot and through the door. Eliot heard his feet clattering on the downward ramp.

The Earthman sat down and buried his face in his hands.

A minute or two later he felt impelled to turn on the external view screen to get another look at *Dominus*. A bizarre sight met his eyes. Balbain, about halfway between *Dominus* and the ship, had prostrated himself before the great beast and was making small gestures whose meanings were known only to himself. Eliot switched off the screen. A few minutes later, not having heard Balbain return, he looked again. There was no sign of the alien.

He was not sure how long he then sat there, trying to decide what best next to do, before a noise made him look up. The interstellar expedition's only other surviving member was entering the chamber.

Zeed was the least humanoid of all the team. He walked on limbs that could be said to constitute a pair of legs, except that they could also reconstitute themselves into tentacles, or a bunch of sticks, or a number of other devices to accommodate him to locomotion over a variety of different surfaces. Above these limbs a short dumpy body of indeterminate shape was hidden by a thick cloak which also hid his arms. Above this, a head of sorts: speckled golden eyes that did not at first look like eyes, other organs buried within fluted, bony grooves arranged in a symmetrical pattern.

The voice in which he spoke to Eliot, however, could have passed as human, although no mouth appeared to move.

"Explanations are superfluous," he said, moving into the chamber and looking down on Eliot. "I have consulted the ship's log."

Eliot nodded. The log, of course, automatically recorded everything that took place within the ship.

"It appears that Balbain could not constrain himself and has forfeited his life," Zeed continued. "It is not surprising. However, it determines our end, also, since only Abrak and Balbain knew how to pilot the ship."

This was news to Eliot, but in his present state the prospect of death caused him little alarm.

"Did *you* know Balbain's secret reason for this mission?" he asked.

"Of course. But it was no secret. Your people, being ignorant of alien races, made a presumption concerning its nature." Gliding smoothly on his versatile legs, Zeed moved to the view screen and made a full circle scan of their surroundings. Then he turned back to Eliot. "Perhaps it is a disappointment to you."

"Why did Balbain want any of us along at all?" Eliot said wearily. "Just to make use of us?"

"In a way. But we were all making use of each other. The universe is vast and quite mysterious, Eliot. It is an unfathomable darkness in which creatures arise having no common ground with each other. Hence, if they meet they may not be able to comprehend one another. Here in this ship we act as antennae for one another. We are not so alien to one another that we cannot communicate, yet sufficiently unalike so that each may understand some phenomena we encounter that the others cannot."

"So that's what we are," Eliot said resentfully. "A star-travelling menagerie."

“An ark, in which each has a separate quest. Yours is the obsession to acquire knowledge. We do not share it, but the data you are collecting is your reward for the services you may, at some time, have been able to render one of us. You were enjoying yourselves too much for us to disillusion you concerning ourselves.”

“But how can you *not* share it?” Eliot exclaimed. “Scientific inquiry is fundamental to intelligence, surely? How else can one ever understand the universe?”

“But others do not want to understand it, Eliot. That is only your own relationship to it; your chief ethological feature, whether you recognize it or not. You would still have joined this expedition, for instance, if it had meant giving up sex for the rest of your life.”

“And yet you have a scientific culture and travel in spaceships.”

“A matter of mere practicality. Pure, abstract science exists only for *homo sapiens*—I have not encountered it elsewhere. Other races carry out investigations only for the material benefits they bring. As an extreme example, think of *Dominus*: he, and probably countless of the animals here, possess vastly more of the knowledge you admire than do either of us, yet they have no interest in it and continue to live in a wild condition.”

Eliot’s thoughts were returning to Alanie and the disinterest all the aliens had shown in her horrifying death. He remembered Balbain’s enigmatic remark. “Abrak,” he said bleakly, “what was *he* seeking?”

“His species craves *abnormal death*. The cause of it is thuswise: life, however long, must end. Life, then, is conditioned by death. Hence death is larger than life. Abrak’s people are conscious that everything, ultimately, is abnegated by death, and they look for fulfilment only in the manner of their dying. An individual of his species seeks to die in some unusual or noteworthy manner. Suicides receive praise, provided the method is extraordinary. Murderers, likewise, are folk heroes, if their killings show imagination. Ultimately, the whole species strives to be exterminated in some style so extraordinary as to make its existence seem meaningful. Five seemed to offer that promise—not in its present state, it is true, but after suitable evolutionary development, perhaps due to an invasion by Abrak’s people.”

“And *you*,” Eliot demanded. “What do *you* seek?”

“We,” answered Zeed with an icy lack of hesitation, “seek NULLITY. Not merely to die, like Abrak’s species, but to wipe out the past, *never to have been*.”

Eliot shook his head, aghast. “How can *any* living creature have an ambition like that?”

“You must understand that on your planet conditions have been remarkably gentle and favorable for the arising of life. Such is not the general rule. Elsewhere there is hardship and struggle, often of a severity you could not imagine. The universe rarely smiles on the formation of life. On my planet...” Zeed seemed to hesitate, “we regard it as an act of compassion to kill our offspring at birth. The unlucky ones are spared to answer nature’s call to perpetuate the species. If you knew my planet, you would not think that life could evolve there at all. We believe that ever since the first nervous system developed the subconscious feeling that it has all been a mistake has been present. To you, of course, it looks weird and perverted.”

“Yes... it does indeed,” Eliot said slowly. “In any case, isn’t it impossible? I presume you are travelling the galaxy in search of some race that has time travel, so that you can wipe out your own past. But look at it this way: even if you succeeded in that, there would still have to be a ‘different past’—the old past, a ghost past—in which you still existed.”

“Once again you display your mental agility,” Zeed said. “Your reasoning is sound: it may be that our craving can be satisfied only if the universe in its entirety is nullified.”

Springing to his feet, Eliot went to the viewscreen and peered out on to turbulent, lightning-struck Five. He thought of Alanie and himself slaving in the laboratory, and felt tricked and insignificant. Zeed seemed to think of their work as no more than the collector’s instinct of a jackdaw or an octopus.

“Everything you’ve told me passes for psychosis back in Solsystem,” he said finally. “I don’t know... maybe this is really a travelling lunatic asylum. You could all be insane, even by the standards of your own people. Balbain had this kinky desire to be a slave, Abrak wanted to be killed bizarrely, and you want never to have been born at all. What kind of a set-up is that? If you ask me, the normal, healthy, human mentality is a lot closer to reality than all that.”

“Every creature says that of itself. It is hard for you to accept that your outlook is not a norm, that it is an aberration, an exception. Let me tell you how it arose. Because of the incredibly luxurious conditions on the planet Earth there was able to develop a quite unique biological class: the *mammalia*. The specific ethological feature of the mammalia is *protectiveness,* which began within the family, then extended to the tribe, and finally, with your own species, has become so over-developed as to embrace the whole of the mammalian class. Every mammal is protected, by your various organizations, whether human or not. Now, the point is that within this shield of protectiveness qualities are able to evolve which actually are quite redundant, since they bear no relation to the hard facts of survival. One of these, becoming intense among monkeys, apes and hominids, is playful curiosity, or meddlesome

inquisitiveness. This developed into the love of knowledge which became the overriding factor in the history of your own species."

"That doesn't sound at all bad to me," Eliot said defensively. "We've done all right so far."

"But not for long, I fear. Your species is in more trouble than you think. There is no future in this mammalian over-protectiveness. The dinosaurs thought themselves safe by reason of their excessive size, did they not? And yet that giantism was exactly what doomed them. Already you ran into serious trouble when your compulsive care for the unfit led to a deterioration of the genetic stock. You saved yourselves that time because you learned to eliminate defective genes artificially. But perhaps other consequences of this nature of yours will arise which you cannot deal with. I do not anticipate that your species will last long."

"While you—death-lovers—will still be here, I suppose?"

Zeed's golden eyes seemed to dim and tarnish. "We all inhabit a vast dark," he repeated, "in which there is neither rhyme nor reason."

"Perhaps so." Eliot's fists were clenched now. "Here's another 'ethological feature', as you call it—revenge! Do you understand that, Zeed? I'm going to take my revenge for the death of my mate! I'm going out there to destroy the animal that killed Alanie."

Zeed did not answer but continued to stare at him and, so it seemed to Eliot's crazed imagination, lost any semblance to a living creature at all. Eliot ran to the lower galleries of the ship and armed himself with one of the few weapons the vessel carried: a high-powered energy beamer. As he stepped down from the ship and on to the booming, crashing surface of Five some of Zeed's words came back to him. An image came to his mind of the endlessness of space in which galaxies seemed to be descending and tumbling, and the words: *an unfathomable darkness without any common ground.* Then he pressed forward to challenge *Dominus.*

Dominus believed he had at last solved a perplexing riddle.

Following his initial seizure of one of the organisms, two others had emerged at short intervals so he had taken those also. A little later, he had moved in on the construct itself and taken a fourth organism from it. Of the fifth, there was no trace.

His analyses came up with the same result every time. The specimens were incomplete organisms: they were sterile. More accurately, they could only reproduce identical copies of themselves, like a plant.

Together with this, their tissues suffered from an inbuilt deficiency which caused them to decay with age.

Plainly these facts were not consistent with motile, autonomous entities. *Dominus* now believed that the specimens he had were only expendable doll-organisms, created by some genuine entity as one might make a machine to carry out certain tasks, and dispatched here, in the metal construct, for a purpose.

And that entity, the owner of the construct and of the doll-organisms, having intruded on his domain once, would be back again.

With that realization an urge beyond all power to resist came upon *Dominus*: the compulsion to *evolve.* He meditated in the depths of his being, and the entity to which he ultimately gave birth, amid great explosions, agonies and devastations, was as far above him in ability as he had been above his immediate inferior.

The new *Dominus* immediately set about the defense of his planet. The whole of the single continent became a spring-board for this defense, criss-crossed with artifacts which meshed integrally with the space-borne artifacts ranging several light-years beyond the atmosphere. To crew this extensive system *Dominus* copied the methods of the invader and created armies of slave doll-organisms modelled on the enemy's own doll-organisms. And *Dominus* waited for the enemy to arrive.